

THE WHITE HOUSE & PRESIDENT'S PARK



COMPREHENSIVE DESIGN PLAN
SUMMARY

THE STORY OF THE WHITE HOUSE . . .

The story of the White House is the story of America. In its rooms and gardens and ceremonial spaces can be read the development of the nation, from the founding of Washington in 1791 to its sacking by the British in 1814, through the Civil War, two world wars, the Great Depression, and many other foreign and domestic crises. Within its walls Abraham Lincoln signed the Emancipation Proclamation and Franklin Delano Roosevelt delivered his “Fireside Chats.” Its gleaming façade has provided a symbolic backdrop for suffragettes, freedom riders and anti-war protesters; on its sloping south lawn children gather for Easter egg rolls and to watch the lighting of the National Christmas Tree.

In good times and bad, the White House is “America’s House,” the most potent symbol of the nation’s democratic ideals. It is the only home of a head of state regularly open free to the public, offering ordinary citizens a glimpse of how their leaders live and work. Instead of a remote architectural monument, it is a living symbol of government’s accessibility, to the extent that we routinely speak of it as having moods, attitudes and distinguishing features. The White House is said to possess “dignity” and “stature;” to appear “concerned” or “jubilant;” to have a voice that “declares,” “defends” or offers “no comment.”

And yet for all its symbolic importance, the White House is also a 200-year-old building forced to play an extraordinary range of roles: home and office of the president, historic site, museum, tourist attraction, civic centerpiece, national symbol and world stage. The White House is the headquarters of the executive branch of government, where the most critical political decisions are made, and the ceremonial center of the nation, which communicates America’s values to the world. More than one million people visit it each year, and millions more would like to.

In accommodating this rush of competing demands, White House planning has often been piecemeal and ad hoc. Its utilities and other basic services are out of date. The pressroom, an international communications hub, resembles a set from a 1950s television program. Presidential staff and other participants must

often stand two and three deep at meetings for lack of adequate space. There is little room to store furniture and equipment for official events, or to park cars for daily business.

For the most part, Americans are unaware of these problems. On the evening news or the front page of the morning paper the white columns still gleam, the chandeliers still sparkle and the lawns and shrubs remain impeccably groomed. What more could they ask for? Or more precisely, why should they spend hundreds of millions of dollars fixing something that doesn't appear broken?

The answer to this question, of course, is because it's the White House, our house, the most famous house in the world.

The *Comprehensive Design Plan for the White House and President's Park* preserves the historic integrity of both, while accommodating the needs of the presidency in the 21st century. If approved, the plan will make the White House work better by modernizing its infrastructure, expanding its meeting and storage space, and adding facilities for the press. It will create underground parking for White House staff, and indoor recreation space for the first family. It will make touring the White House safer, more enjoyable and more informative by providing a new visitor center featuring exhibits, films, interactive displays and special presentations.

The *Comprehensive Design Plan* has been prepared by the National Park Service, with the assistance of other federal agencies and numerous private organizations and consultants. It is the first comprehensive plan for the White House, distilled from dozens of technical reports and alternatives. It offers practical suggestions for maintaining the White House as both the home of the president and the seat of government in an era of political fragmentation and bewildering technological change. It reflects a broad consensus that preserving the historic integrity of the White House and its setting is above politics and party, and that careful long-range planning serves not a particular president but the institution of the presidency and the interests of the nation.

Plan for Washington in 1800, showing the physical and symbolic relationships between the President's House and the Capitol.
 William Rollinson (after Andrew Ellicot Plan of the City of Washington, New York: I. Reid), 1795.

